

The Journal of Educational Issues of Language Minority Students, v13 p. 209-221, Spring 1994.

TRANSFERRING LITERACY SKILLS FROM L1 TO L2: FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

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Note: This information was originally published and provided by The Bilingual Education Teacher Preparation Program at Boise State University. Every attempt has been made to maintain the integrity of the printed text. In some cases, figures and tables have been reconstructed within the constraints of the electronic environment.

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Literacy concerns and issues are becoming increasingly important to English as a second language (ESL), Bilingual education (BE) practitioners, and teacher educators. The statistics may be familiar: More than 25% of the world's adult population cannot read or write (Modoux, 1990). Kozol (1985) asserts that more than one-third of the adults in the U.S. cannot read or write English at "survival level" (p. 4), while the U.S. Department of Education estimates that 20% of adult Americans are "functionally illiterate," and a further 34% are marginally literate (Literacy Volunteers of America, 1989). Preliterate and illiterate refugees continue to enter the U.S., joining the many members of indigenous minorities, such as Hispanics, Blacks, and Native Americans, who have an alarmingly high rate of illiteracy (Bureau of the Census, March, 1988). Of particular concern is that the majority of illiterate people, both in the U.S. and in the world, are generally poor, disadvantaged, and members of minority or displaced groups struggling to improve their situations (Modoux, 1990). The United Nations General Assembly, responding to a UNESCO initiative, proclaimed International Literacy Year to help focus attention on this area.

Part of the discrepancy among the illiteracy statistics cited is due to differences in definitions, which range from the ability to encode and decode written symbols to the ability to interpret events and experiences in a social and political context. Recognizing the validity of multiple views of literacy is valuable in helping reveal how complex literacy is (Mercado, 1991). These varying definitions will be explored in the first part of this paper.

Literacy is not necessarily beneficial in and of itself; many oral cultures function quite well with no writing system. In the U.S., some Native American cultures prefer that their languages not be written. The Cherokee do not believe that all their people should be able to read and write. The Amish do not believe there is a need for education beyond the 8th grade (Heath, 1986). On the other hand, in many parts of the world, literacy is seen as essential for improving one's social and economic situation. In the United States, literacy is viewed as an economic necessity: It "plays a major academic and social role in the formal school systems of North America. Thus, learning to read and write is perceived to be a major task for the student and a notable feature of acculturation into mainstream culture" (DeStefano, 1984, p. 157).

Seen in this political light, the consequences of literacy instruction become clearer. As the disfranchised

acquire literacy tools, they become more able to express their needs and claim their rights. In the U.S., this may be seen as threatening the status quo of the majority population. If the issue of literacy is seen in an educational light, the consequences include developing L1 literacy in the non-English proficient population before developing those skills in English. This implies a tremendous increase in bilingual programs at all levels of public schools-and this would not be limited to Spanish speakers, but would include speakers of Vietnamese, Polish, Lao, and so on. This would have a significant economic impact on thousands of school districts nationwide. To compound the problem, U.S. society seems not to have reached any national consensus on the value and goals of bilingual education, yet those goals will determine to a large extent the outcomes of BE programs (Williams & Snipper, 1990).

Thus, concerns and issues related to the transfer of literacy skills must be considered in the context of political, social, economic, and educational consequences. Do literacy skills developed in L1 transfer to L2? Many researchers and practitioners in ESL/BE are aware of research evidence which supports such transfer, but research is not always applied to practice. In this paper, I will discuss definitions of literacy, review research related to the transfer of literacy skills, and suggest some practical applications of research findings.

DEFINITIONS OF LITERACY

Perhaps the simplest and most restricted definition of literacy is an ability to read and write in a language. In a survey conducted for the National Reading Council, literacy was defined as "the ability to respond to practical tasks of daily life" (Harris & Associates, 1970, in Heath, 1986, p. 15). The National Census asserts that individuals are literate if they have finished 6 grades of school or more and can "read and write a simple message in any language" (Heath, 1986, p. 15). According to Heath (1986), "public schools see literacy as an individual accomplishment measured by psychometric scales of reading ability" (p. 15). "Functional literacy," another popular term, was first used by the U.S. Army and was defined as the ability to understand military functions or activities and to be able to read at the 5th grade level (de Castell & Luke, 1986). Functional literacy is defined by the particular functions that need to be carried out, yet it remains ill defined because it is difficult to specify functions that all members of a literate society need. It certainly involves both reading and writing, since one influences the other (Williams & Snipper, 1990).

Snow (1992) points out that in the past, perspectives on second language acquisition in general have been linguistic or psycholinguistic in nature, focusing on cognitive aspects of learning languages. A more fruitful perspective, she believes, is sociocultural, which recognizes the importance of societal attitudes and group membership. This makes it possible to consider literacy in terms of what is appropriate rather than an indefinable standard language.

In an historical perspective, it is possible to identify several historical views of literacy, views which are reflected in educational and language teaching methodologies popular in North America at the time (de Castell & Luke, 1986). In the late 19th century, literacy was equated to high culture and was reflected in the classical method in which foreign languages were studied as a part of an individual's formal education. In the early 20th century, literacy was seen as interpersonal communication, and the emphasis was on the democratization of culture. This was reflected in the direct and audiolingual methods in which languages were studied, so an individual could communicate with native speakers. Since the 1950s, the technocratic view has encouraged the centralization of schooling with an emphasis on the standardization of literate behavior-note the emphasis on the use of language laboratories and computers in foreign language and ESL classrooms. Literacy in this perspective is seen as context-neutral and value free (de Castell & Luke, 1986,

p. 87), a view which is disputed by many in ESL/BE. Such a view of literacy is vital to an understanding of the consequences of literacy instruction, and so the concepts of literacy being value-free versus being a tool of acculturation will be considered in greater detail later. Although vaguely defined, literacy in this paper will be considered to involve the ability to function appropriately in a literate environment which necessarily includes reading, writing, and thinking skills.

DOES L1 LITERACY TRANSFER TO L2 LITERACY?

The question of transferability of literacy skills is in large measure related to how literacy is defined. The response is both affirmative and negative, and each will be considered in turn.

"Yes" Responses. Definitions which limit literacy to encoding/decoding skills and functional abilities generally involve rather low-level skills and are generally agreed to transfer. These include prereading skills of directionality, sequencing, ability to distinguish shapes and sounds, and knowledge that written symbols correspond to sounds and can be decoded in order and direction (Lessow-Hurley, 1990). Other skills include activation of semantic and syntactic knowledge; recognition of some rhetorical devices, and knowledge of text structure (Mace Matluck, 1982); learning to use cues to predict meaning (all languages are redundant) (Goodman, Goodman, & Flores, 1979); awareness of the variety of purposes for reading and writing (such as directing behavior--STOP!; providing information--ingredients of a food product, or news stories: describing a process such as how to set an alarm clock, and so on) (Hudelson, 1987); strategies, such as experimenting, hypothesizing, creating, constructing meaning; and perhaps most important, confidence in oneself as a reader and writer--especially important when the L1 is viewed negatively in the society (as with many Spanish speaking children in the U.S.) (Hudelson, 1987).

Evidence for the transfer of these kinds of literacy skills is abundant. Gudschinsky (1977) discusses programs in Peru, in Mexico, and in the highlands of Vietnam, where L1 literacy promoted L2 literacy (Gudschinsky, 1977). Chu-Chang (1981) reviews 16 programs where experimental groups were taught reading first in their L1 and then in the L2, whereas in the control groups, students were taught all subjects in their L2. In 11 of the programs, the experimental group was more successful in L2 reading than the control. In two studies no differences were found, in another two the results were inconclusive, and one study failed to produce results. Robson (1981, cited in Penfield, 1986) found that Hmong refugee adults who were already literate in their NL were more successful in acquiring English in the classroom. Bartoff (1984, in Penfield, 1986) found that adult speakers of Haitian Creole who were taught literacy skills first in the L1 acquired English language and literacy skills faster than those not receiving L1 literacy instruction. There were also changes in attitude and self-identity.

Other evidence for the transfer of literacy skills comes from studies of bilingual instruction. Troike's 1978 review of evaluations and research studies concluded that bilingual instruction is more effective than English-only instruction in promoting English reading skills (in Mace-Matluck, 1982). Rodriguez-Brown (in Mace-Matluck, 1982) found that limited English proficient (LEP) students given bilingual instruction made greater gains in English reading skills over a school year than similar children instructed only in English. Goodman & Goodman (1978; in Mace-Matluck, 1982) found that elementary grade Spanish, Arabic, Samoan, and Navajo students learned to read English more easily if they were literate in their first language than if they were preliterate bilinguals.

Research studies on the results of bilingual education programs can, however, be of limited value since they focus on the acquisition of English language skills and are typically summative program evaluations (Pease-Alvarez & Hakuta, 1992; Cziko, 1992). Case studies rich in detail and better able to illustrate the interplay

of specified variables would be a welcome addition to the literature.

More studies could be cited, but it can be concluded from the above that literacy skills related to decoding tasks of reading and writing do indeed transfer. To account for results like these, Cummins (1981) proposes the Common Underlying Proficiency model, whereby skills, knowledge, and concepts learned in any language can be accessed through different languages. There is no need to relearn acquired knowledge; thus, time spent developing conceptual knowledge in the L1, including a multidimensional concept such as literacy is not wasted time.

That is the "yes" response to the question of the transfer of literacy skills. In the next section the "no" response will be discussed.

"No" Responses. Many are beginning to see literacy as much more than a decoding/encoding skill. Fishman (1989) argues for a broad view of literacy as "a phenomenon that requires local cultural validity and that may, therefore, take different forms, pursue different goals, be linked to different contextual and institutional supports from one speech community to another and even from one speech network to another" (p. 25). E. D. Hirsch, in his popular *Cultural Literacy* (1987) asserts that functional literacy is not sufficient for a complex society, that literacy must be based on shared knowledge and traditions, and that it includes oral literacy. One difficulty with this view is deciding what knowledge and traditions should make up the essential shared foundation-and the "test of time" is impractical for today's curriculum designers. Another more serious difficulty is what Field (1992) calls the ethnocentricity and "cultural imperialism implicit in using such a list" (p. 165). With the new emphasis on multicultural education, many practitioners find themselves expected to mediate between those expounding the virtues of the back-to-basics curriculum and those advocating multiculturalism.

Yet another view of literacy is that of critical literacy, the "ability to recognize the social essence of literacy" and "to understand its fundamentally political nature" (Williams & Snipper, 1990, p. 10). Literacy must be defined in context what is literate for an elementary school child is illiterate for a college student, and one can be literate in an area of specialization and illiterate in another, such as law or medicine (Williams & Snipper, 1990). Children do not acquire literacy quickly or easily-reading and writing skills are not acquired until later elementary grades, and critical or cultural literacy are accomplished much later and probably continue to develop throughout a lifetime.

In a similar vein, Weinstein (1984) says that "literacy is not a set of mechanical coding and decoding skills, but rather a way of processing information which will affect ways of interacting" (p. 477). Rather than limiting ourselves to a static, decontextualized view of literacy, we can consider literacy as a "model of communication that takes on meaning within specific social contexts" (p. 478). It thus becomes important to realize that the acquisition of literacy implies the acquisition of values and the uses associated with literacy. Literacy cannot be value free, because it always occurs in a social and cultural context. For example, Giroux (1983, cited in Meisenhelder, 1992) links functional literacy with capitalism, with the goal of making workers more productive (as opposed to creating more critical thinkers). Transfer thus becomes a question of biculturalism or acculturation, placing practitioners in a position where they must be careful not to force a particular world view on others under the guise of promoting reading and writing skills. Unfortunately, mainstream culture, whose task it must be to promote and fund programs for minority literacy, will always be resistant to doing so because it reacts to change as threat and because the values and traditions of minorities are most adeptly expressed by literate members of those minorities. Ogbu (1992) addresses this need to consider the wider social context of the relationship between a particular minority group and mainstream white culture in the U.S. Behaviors that lead to success in formal schooling situations may be

socially inappropriate, even taboo, in students' home communities. Thus literacy is seen as more than reading and writing. It is in reality a way of viewing the society and one's role in that society relative to others. These issues, though not necessarily easily verbalized, are nonetheless familiar to many ESL/BE practitioners and their students. It is often the larger society which needs to be made aware of the political nature of literacy and of the power it may wield.

Having thus reviewed some basic issues of transferability, the next section addresses several practical applications of the research evidence.

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

An Ideal Application. Ideally, a program that develops reading and writing skills in the first language, in which learners already have oral proficiency, should be implemented. There is no loss of time in learning English since skills will transfer as English is introduced. In addition, learners' home languages are given validity by their presence in the school, which improves the self-esteem of the learners, which in turn results in greater learning. Dual language programs are frequently the best choice for language minority (and majority) students. However, in districts with few nonnative speakers of English or those with students of less common languages, or those where there simply is no public or educational support for such a program, it is possible to develop literacy skills in English without recourse to the L1.

Suggested Applications. Though most practitioners work in less than ideal situations, they can apply research findings in a number of ways. Building on Hudelson's (1987) findings that literacy develops naturally in learners in a literate environment, teachers can alert students to road signs, advertising, print media, and labels in their environments. Students can bring in examples of print they encounter daily. Meanings, sounds, and graphic symbols should be taught simultaneously. Students are often already aware that graphic symbols can express verbal meaning, and starting with what learners already know is effective educational practice. Teachers should also remember that the home is an important aid to learners' education; print materials may be available in the home, and as research shows, the language those materials are written in is not of great importance. (See Rangel, 1990, for an annotated bibliography of articles on family literacy.)

Teachers can also help to develop literacy naturally by including a variety of opportunities for reading and writing in the classroom. Research has shown a strong correlation between reading and writing skills (Janopoulos, 1986). Teachers can create resource centers or corners where students can browse through a variety of written materials at different levels of difficulty. In addition, teachers can model literate behavior so that students see their teachers read and write. Teachers should read to themselves and to their students for enjoyment, and they should follow through by taking the time to discuss what was read and to encourage students to relate it to their own lives and previous knowledge, to integrate the new into existing information. To encourage writing, teachers can create a workshop environment where the activities are structured by the teacher, but the process for accomplishing the activities is the responsibility of the students. It is important that the atmosphere be nonthreatening and relaxing, so students are willing to take risks, collaborate with each other, and write and revise naturally through the generation of ideas and clarification of their own thoughts. In this type of setting, the teacher acts as a resource and can intervene with appropriate response as needed (Williams & Snipper, 1990).

A third application is to make use of holistic techniques such as the Language Experience Approach. In this approach, students and teacher share an experience, such as a walk around the school, a visit to a museum, a cooking activity. Together, they discuss the experience. The teacher asks the learners to describe what

they did or said, and as they do so, the teacher writes the sentences on the board or on butcher block paper. After writing several sentences, the teacher asks the students to read what they have all just written. The students can read it because they just wrote it—at first it may be primarily memory, but this initial success in reading will soon lead to more advanced skills. Also, elements of a holistic approach can be incorporated into many classroom activities by using language in all skill areas, not just in one or two. As soon as students are ready, teachers can begin dialogue journals with them, in which learners write a short message to the teacher, who responds, uncritically, to the meaning and not to the form of the message. Even using pictures to communicate helps students feel comfortable with the use of graphic symbols.

Like whole language activities, a task-based approach is valuable because it entails multiple strategies and skills. Mercado (1991) describes a project with African American and Hispanic 6th graders in New York in which the students work with other students, the teacher, and other resources to conduct and give presentations on research involving their communities. In her project, literacy becomes part of the larger goal of learning. Though preliminary, early results reveal "dramatic gains in reading" skills (p. 183). Similarly, Moll (1992) encourages teachers to provide "authentic literacy practices" (p. 21), to use literacy as a tool for "inquiry, communication, and thinking" (p. 21) and discusses the value of involving the community, including parents, as resources.

A fourth suggestion is based on Ogbu's (1992) discussion of the ways in which success in formal school may involve behavior inappropriate to the students' home, community, or both. He encourages teachers to try to learn more about their learners—including general cultural and historical information and to help learners find alternative behaviors which will not be seen as acting "white" but which will nevertheless lead to academic success. Practitioners who are well informed become invaluable resources to their colleagues, administrators, and the community.

Research also helps clarify practices which are not effective for literacy acquisition. If possible, teachers should avoid basal readers and counsel other teachers not to be held hostage to grade level expectations. Basal readers are unnatural, artificial, and can actually interfere with students' attempts at comprehension (Hare, Rabinowitz, & Schieble, 1989, cited in Williams & Snipper, 1990). Instead, children's literature, which is both interesting and meaningful, should be used. The core literature approach, for example, proposes that students need to read professional models of writing. Literature incorporates cultural information (*The Red Pony*, 1945; *The Little Engine that Could*, 1961) and expands vocabulary. In addition to the enjoyment of reading literature, teachers should take time to identify problems in the story, discuss solutions, change endings, role play, and find related stories (Williams & Snipper, 1990). Older students can write and produce plays based on literature.

Finally, in the important area of assessment, practitioners can argue against using standardized reading tests for their students and instead keep portfolios to show student progress. Urzua (1986) believes that teachers should gather data from a variety of sources, considering both the process and product of children's writing and recognizing that factors outside teacher control, such as weather or illness, may influence student performance. Again, research can be criticized for its emphasis on measuring English language skills. A broader definition of literacy argues for a broader, more flexible assessment of student ability.

These applications do not require abandoning the practices already used by ESL/BE practitioners. Instead, they argue for a more inclusive and holistic approach to education, expanding current practices, and especially encouraging content area/mainstream teachers to recognize the pedagogical applications of literacy research.

CONCLUSION

To summarize, how literacy is defined has important implications for decision making. While it may be possible to limit literacy to a narrow definition of encoding/decoding skills, this view fails to acknowledge that literacy confers a powerful tool for participating in and changing society. Further, limiting oneself to a single definition has the effect of denying the complexity of the concept and of failing to recognize the conflicts that result from literacy as it functions at individual, group, and societal levels. Above all, it is imperative to remember that educational outcomes and the allotment of educational resources are greatly influenced by outside forces (including availability of funds, competing needs, community and societal attitudes, even world events, as when the launching of the Russian satellite Sputnik in 1957 sparked renewed interest in the teaching of foreign languages). Defining literacy is not merely an exercise in clarification; it is taking a political stand with economic and social consequences.

Even with the complexity inherent in defining literacy, research evidence is clear that basic literacy skills developed in L1 transfer to L2. Unfortunately, this evidence is not always acted upon. Such evidence can and should be used to promote L1 literacy programs where possible, and where not possible, practitioners can be reassured that there is evidence that L2 literacy can be developed through educational practices that recognize and take advantage of a literate environment. In addition, practitioners can be of great help to learners who sense the conflicts implicit in English literacy acquisition. If learners can recognize and explore the political and sociocultural implications of literacy with respect to their own lives and communities, they will be better equipped to make decisions that will meet their own needs and goals. Literacy can be the process and product of inquiry.

Finally, while bilingual practitioners may be familiar with this issue, it is often clouded for others by the intricate interplay of social and political factors. Practitioners can become advocates and crosstrainers by basing their own choices and activities on the research that is known and by sharing what is known with others. Teachers are often not only the most effective advocates for ESL/BE students, but sometimes they are the only advocates. It is important to be aware of the complexity of issues surrounding the question of the transfer of literacy skills and to use that knowledge to promote and facilitate educational equity for students.

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